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"The Boyhood of Abraham Lincoln"

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HISTORIC BOYHOODS.

BY RUPERT-SARGENT-HOLLAND

VII. ABRAHAM LINCOLN: THE BOY OF THE AMERICAN WILDERNESS

SQUIRE JOSIAH CRAWFORD was seated on the porch of his house in Gentryville, Indiana, one spring afternoon when a small boy called to see him. The Squire was a testy old man, not very fond of boys, and he glanced up over his book, impatient and annoyed at the interruption.

"What do you want here?" he demanded.

The boy had pulled off his raccoon-skin cap, and stood holding it in his hand while he eyed the old man.

"They say down at the store, sir," said the boy, "that you have a 'Life of George Washington.' I'd like very much to read it."

The Squire peered closer at his visitor, surprised out of his annoyance at the words. He looked over the boy, carefully examining his long, lank figure, the tangled mass of black hair, his deep-set eyes, and large mouth. He was evidently from some poor country family. His clothes were made of skins, and the trousers were shrunk until they barely reached below his knees.

"What's your name, boy?" asked the Squire.

"Abraham Lincoln, son of Thomas Lincoln, down on Pidgeon Creek."

The Squire said to himself: "It must be that Tom Lincoln, who, folks say, is a ne'er-do-well and moves from place to place every year because he can't make his farm support him." Then he said, aloud, to the boy: "What do you want with my 'Life of Washington'?"

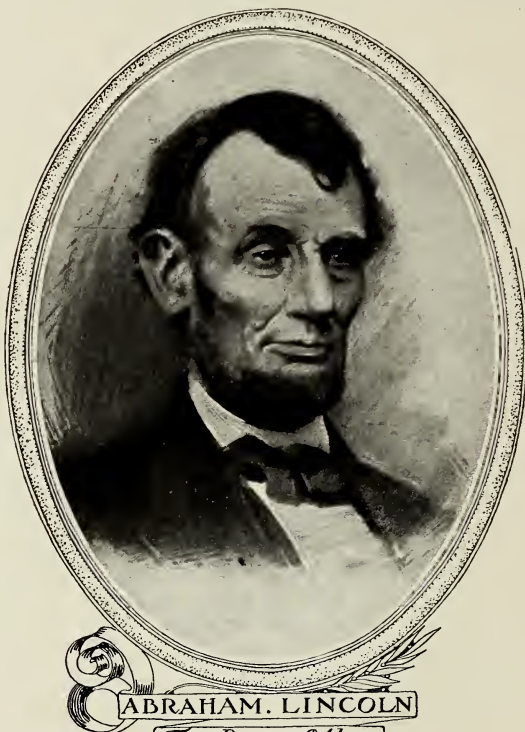
"I've been learning about him at school, and I'd like to know more."

The old man studied the boy in silence for some moments; something about the lad seemed to attract him. Finally he said: "Can I trust you to take good care of the book if I lend it to you?"

"As good care," said the boy, "as if it was made of gold, if you'd only please let me have it for a week."

His eyes were so eager that the old man could not withstand them. "Wait here a minute," he

said, and went into the house. When he returned he brought the coveted volume with him and handed it to the boy. "There it is," said he,



ABRAHAM. LINCOLN

The Boy of the
AMERICAN
WILDERNESS.

"I'm going to let you have it, but be sure it does n't come to harm down on Pidgeon Creek."

The boy, with the precious volume tucked tightly under his arm, went down the single street of Gentryville with the joy of anticipation in his face. He could hardly wait to open the

book and plunge into it. He stopped for a moment at the village store to buy some calico his stepmother had ordered, and then struck into the road through the woods that led to his home.

The house which he found at the end of his trail was a very primitive affair. The first home Tom Lincoln had built on the Creek when he moved there from Kentucky had been merely a "pole-shack," four poles driven into the ground with forked ends at the top, other poles laid crosswise in the forks, and a roof of poles built on this square. There had been no chimney, only an open place for a window, and another for a door, and strips of bark and patches of clay to keep the rain out. The new house was a little better, it had an attic, and the first floor was divided into several rooms. It was very primitive, however, in reality only a big log-cabin.

The boy came out of the woods, crossed the clearing about the house, and went in at the door. His stepmother was sitting at the window sewing. He held up the volume for her to see. "I've got it!" he cried. "It's the 'Life of Washington,' and now I'm going to learn all about him." He had barely time to put the book in the woman's hands before his father's voice was heard calling him out of doors. There was work to be done on the farm, and the rest of that afternoon Abe was kept busily employed, and as soon as supper was finished his father set him to work mending harness.

At dawn the next day the boy was up and out in the fields, the "Life of Washington" in one pocket, the other pocket filled with corn dodgers. He could not read and run a straight furrow. When it was noon-time he sat under a tree, munching the cakes, and plunged into the first chapter of the book. For half an hour he read and ate, then he had to go on with his work until sundown. When he got home he had his supper standing up so that he could read the book by the candle that stood on the shelf. After supper he lay in front of the fire, still reading, and oblivious to everything about him.

Gradually the fire burned out, the family went to bed, and young Abe was obliged to go up to his room in the attic. He put the book on a ledge on the wall close to the head of his bed in order that nothing might happen to it. During the night a violent storm arose, and the rain came through a chink in the log-walls. When the boy woke he found that the book was a mass of wet paper, the type blurred, and the cover beyond repair. He was heartbroken at the discovery. He could imagine how angry the old Squire would be when he saw the state of the book. Nevertheless he determined to go to Gen-

tryville at the earliest opportunity and see what he could do to make reparation.

The next Sunday morning found a small boy standing on the Squire's porch with the remains of the book in his hand. When the Squire learned what had happened he spoke his mind freely. He told Abe that he was as worthless as his father, that he did n't know how to take care of



THE LINCOLN LOG-CABIN

valuable property, and that he would never loan him another book as long as he lived. The boy faced the music, and when the angry tirade was over, said that he would like to shuck corn for the Squire, and in that way pay him the value of the ruined volume. Mr. Crawford accepted the offer and named a price far greater than any possible value of the book, and Abe set to work, spending all his spare time in the next two weeks shucking the corn and working as chore-boy. So he finally succeeded in paying back the full value of the ruined "Life of Washington."

This was only one of many adventures that befell Abraham Lincoln while he was trying to get an education. His mother had taught him to read and write, and ever since he had learned he had longed for books to read. He said to his

cousin, Dennis Hanks, one day, "Denny, the things I want to know are in books. My best friend is the man who will get me one." Dennis was very fond of his younger cousin, and as soon as he could save up the money he went to town and bought a copy of the "Arabian Nights." He gave this to Abe, and the latter at once started to read it aloud by the wood-fire in the evenings. His mother, his sister Sally, and Dennis were his audience. His father thought the reading only waste of time and said, "Abe, your mother can't work with you pestering her like that," but Mrs. Lincoln said the stories helped her and so the reading went on. When he came to the story of how Sindbad the Sailor went too close to the magic rock and lost all the nails out of the bottom of his boat, Abe laughed until he cried. Dennis, however, could n't see the humor. "Why, Abe," said he, "that yarn 's just a lie."

"P'raps so," answered the small boy, "but if it is, it 's a mighty good lie."

But as ST. NICHOLAS has already told you: "The boy, Abraham Lincoln, had very few books. His earliest possessions consisted of less than half a dozen volumes—a pioneer's library.

"First, of course, was the Bible, a whole library in itself, if properly understood, and containing every sort of literature—stories, poems, dramas, addresses, orations, histories, some simple enough for the youngest child, others taxing the wisdom of the learned. Second was 'Pilgrim's Progress,' with its quaint characters and vivid scenes related in simple, vigorous English. 'Æsop's Fables' was a third, and introduced the log-cabin boy to a wonderful range of characters—the gods of mythology, the different ranks and classes of mankind, and every animal under the sun. Fourth was a History of the United States, in which there was the charm of truth and a more modern tone, and from which were learned the lessons of patriotism that Lincoln's manhood put into action. Last came Weems's 'Life of Washington,' a queer, stilted book, but one full of detail that made Washington seem a living example.

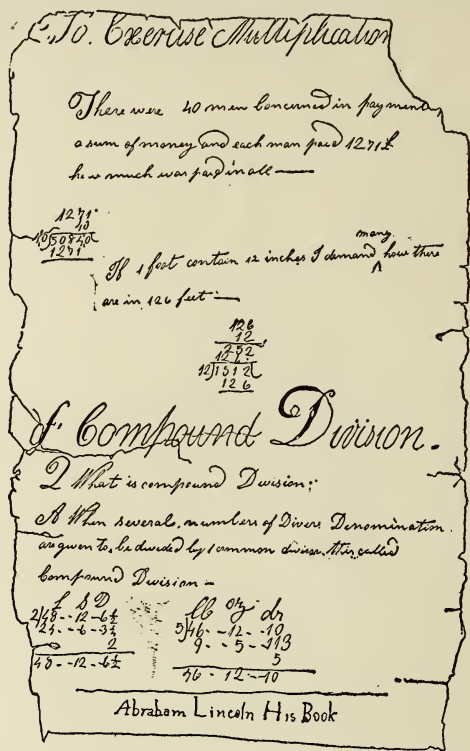
"These five books were the beginning of Lincoln's education; and what wise man has outgrown them all?

"From the Bible, Pilgrim's Progress, and Æsop the boy Lincoln learned the power and beauty of plain English words, and saw that the grandest thoughts and most poetic imaginings needed only the strong little words of every day. When, therefore, in later life he wished to be sure he understood any matter, it became his custom to translate it into words such as a child can understand.

"Read again the Gettysburg Address and the

Second Inaugural Address, and learn how Lincoln, the President, could make the homespun words of common use move the hearts of his fellow-men."

In Nicolay and Hay's "Life of Lincoln" it is recorded that "he read these five books over and over till he knew them almost by heart. . . . He would sit in the twilight and read a dictionary as long as he could see. . . . He even devoured the 'Revised Statutes of Indiana' as boys in our day



A LEAF FROM ABRAHAM LINCOLN'S EXERCISE BOOK
When the book was written Lincoln was about seventeen.

do 'The Three Guardsmen.' . . . He could not afford to waste paper upon his original compositions. He would sit by the fire at night and cover the wooden shovel with essays and arithmetical exercises, which he would shave off and then begin again. It is touching to think of this great-spirited child, battling year after year against his evil star, wasting his ingenuity upon devices and makeshifts, his high intelligence starving for want of the simple appliances of education that are now offered gratis to the poorest and most indifferent."

The few books he was able to get made the keen-witted country boy anxious to find people who could answer his questions for him. In

those days many men, clergymen, judges, and lawyers, rode on circuit, stopping overnight at any farm-house they might happen upon. When such a man would ride up to the Lincoln clearing he was usually met by a small boy who would fire questions at him before he could dismount from his horse. The visitor would be amused, but Tom Lincoln thought that a poor sort of hospitality. He would come running out of the house and say, "Stop that, Abe. What 's happened to your manners?" Then he would turn to the traveler, "You must excuse him. 'Light, stranger, and come in to supper." Then Abe would go away whistling to show that he did n't care. When he found Dennis he said, "Pa says it 's not polite to ask questions, but I guess I was n't meant to be polite. There 's such a lot of things to know, and how am I going to know them if I don't ask questions?" He simply stored them away until a later time, and when supper was over he usually found his chance to make use of the visitor.

In that day Indiana was still part of the wilderness. Primeval woods stood close to Pidgeon Creek, and not far away were roving bands of Sacs and Sioux, and also wild animals—bears, wildcats and lynx. The settlers fought the Indians and made use of the wild creatures for clothing and food, and to sell at the country stores. The children spent practically all their time out of doors, and young Abe Lincoln learned the habits of the wild creatures, and explored the far recesses of the woods. He was fond of animals. One day some of the boys at school put a lighted coal on a turtle's back in sport. Abe rescued the turtle, and when he got a chance wrote a composition in school about cruel jokes on animals. It was a good paper, and the teacher had the boy read it before the class. All the boys liked Abe, and they took to heart what he had to say in the matter.

It was a rough sort of life that the children of the early settlers led, and the chances were all in favor of the Lincoln boy growing up to be like his father, a kind-hearted, ignorant, and ne'er-do-well type of man. His mother, however, who came of a good Virginia family, had done her best to give him some ambition. Once she had said to him, "Abe, learn all you can, and grow up to be of some account. You 've got just as good Virginia blood in you as George Washington had." Abe did not forget that. Soon after the family moved to Pidgeon Creek his mother died, and a little later a stepmother took her place. This woman soon learned that the boy was not the ordinary type, and kept encouraging him to make something of himself. She was al-

ways ready to listen when he read, to help him with his lessons, to encourage him. When he got too old to wear his bearskin suit she told him that if he would earn enough money to get some muslin, she would make him some white shirts, so that he would not be ashamed to go to people's houses. Abe earned the money, and Mrs. Lincoln purchased the cloth and made the shirts. After that Abe cut quite a figure in Gentryville, because he liked people, and knew so many good stories that he was always popular with a crowd.

Small things showed the ability that was latent in the raw country lad. When he was only fourteen a copy of Henry Clay's speeches fell into his hands, and he learned most of them by heart, and what he learned from them interested him in history. Then a little later his stepmother was ill for some time, and Abe went to church every Sunday, and on his return repeated the sermon almost word for word to her. Again he loved to argue, and would take up some question he had asked of a stranger and go on with it when the latter returned to the Creek, perhaps months after the first visit. Mrs. Lincoln noted these things, and made up her mind that her stepson would be a great man some day. Most frequently she thought he would be a great lawyer, because, as she said, "When Abe got started arguing, the other fellow 'd pretty soon say he had enough."

The time came when the boy could no longer stay in the small surroundings of Pidgeon Creek. He tried life on one of the river steamboats, then served as a clerk in a store, at New Salem, where he began, in odd moments, to study law. A little later he knew enough law to become an attorney, and went to Springfield, and after that it was only a short time before he had won his clients. His cousin Denny came to hear him try one of his first cases. He watched the tall, lank young fellow, still as ungainly as in his early boyhood, and heard him tell the jury some of those same stories he had read aloud before the fire. When Abe had finished his cousin said to him, "Why did you tell those people so many stories?" "Why, Denny," said Abe, "a story teaches a lesson. God tells truths in parables, they are easier for common folks to remember, and recollect."

Such was the simple boyhood of Abraham Lincoln, but its very simplicity, and the hardships he had to overcome to get an education, made him a strong man. He knew people, and when he came later to be President and to guide the country through the greatest trial in its history it was those same qualities of perseverance and courage and trust in the people that made the simple-minded man the great helmsman of the Republic.

